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Glasnost' 1990

John Murray

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It is now five years since Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the policy of 'glasnost' to the Soviet media. During that period the changes in the content of the Soviet press have been enormous. Soviet journalists are now free to write on many of the subjects that were de facto taboo under Brezhnev and his predecessors. The gradual opening up and expansion of subject matter upon which the journalist may write has in turn resulted in a stylistic unfettering of the journalistic manner of exposition which is a change no less important than that of the formal lifting of barriers on previously taboo subjects. Whereas before glasnost' the source of much of what was written in the Soviet press was the language of the Communist party, since 1985, the language of the Soviet press has drawn from a far wider associative field. The combination of new content and language has transformed the face of Soviet journalism.

Since the introduction of glasnost' in 1985, it is clear that there have been several stages in the development of the process. In this article, an attempt will be made to divide very roughly the stages of glasnost' into three periods. The first begins in 1985, after the April plenary session of the Central Committee, when the policy of glasnost' was introduced formally. This period, which lasted until the beginning of 1988, was marked by the gradual realization among journalists that glasnost' was more than yet another empty rhetorical statement issued by an in-coming General Secretary, and was in fact supported by Gorbachev and other progressive elements within the leadership. A second phase in the evolution of glasnost' was discernible early in 1988 when the press began to feel its strength and lose its fear of the conservative elements in the leadership who regularly expressed in a threatening manner their discontent with the destructive nature of glasnost'. Finally, the third phase began in August 1990 with the passing of the Law on the Press, which gave the press a legal protection from Party interference and abolished the State censorship agency, Glavlit.

In this article the divisions between the three different stages of glasnost' are made primarily on the basis of opinions of Soviet journalists who have worked in the Soviet press during the period under examination (1985-1990). An attempt has also been made to distinguish various phases of glasnost' by reference to what in retrospect appear to be watershed events in the fate of the press over the period and subsequent retrospective deduction of the significance of these events on the evolution of glasnost'. However, because of the absence of a clear knowledge of how various bodies within the Communist Party have shaped, or attempted to shape, the face of the press under Gorbachev, one is forced to look at external manifestations of Party interference in the workings of the press in order to establish their role. At best, then, the picture of the evolution of glasnost' that will emerge from this article is a combination of the subjective views of Soviet journalists and the author's own subjective interpretation of the significance of events that seem to have had an important bearing on the fate of the press.

According to Alexander Pumpiansky (1990) editor of the foreign affairs weekly magazine *Novoye vremya* (New Times), the initial phase in the evolution of glasnost' (mid 1985-early 1988) was the most important one. In these first years, alongside the publication in journals and books of hitherto forbidden literature, there appeared a new type of newspaper and magazine. The publication of books such as Andrei Platonov's *Kotlovan* (Foundation Pit) and Vasily Grossman's *Sud'ba i zhizn* (Life and Fate), coincided with the appearance of the unrecognizably revamped periodicals, *Moscow News* and *Ogonek* (Little Fire), soon to become the cutting edge of glasnost'. Before glasnost', both *Moscow News* and *Ogonek* - one a weekly newspaper, the other a weekly magazine - had been paragons of what in Russian is referred to as 'paradnaya literaturnaya', or writing with the intent of promoting a falsely positive picture of life and events in the Soviet Union. *Moscow News* (owned by the Novosti Press Agency and the Union of Societies of Friendship and Cultural Links with Foreign Countries, and printed in five languages, including Russian) was aimed primarily at a foreign readership. Its intention and even function, as was that of the Novosti Press Agency, was to portray to the foreign reader a one-sided image of Soviet life.

One former employee of Novosti under Breshnev, Ivan Zakharov (1990), who in 1990 became deputy editor of a new newspaper, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (The Independent Newspaper), said quite openly that he used to work in 'foreign propaganda'. Having transferred from a foreign propaganda agency to a newspaper which claimed to be in the vanguard of 'progressive' journalism, Zakharov described his previous work as a journalist under Brezhnev:

For 13 years I worked for magazines and newspapers published

by the Novosti organisation which were for foreign consumption. I may not have told the whole truth all the time, but I consoled myself with the thought that I was writing for foreigners and they had a choice of information, other than the Soviet Weekly, (Zakharov, 1990).

The editor of *Ogonek*, Vitaly Korotich (1988), explained that before the advent of glasnost his magazine had been 'simply uninteresting', and that 'nobody believed what was written in it'. According to Korotich, the surge in popularity of *Ogonek* in the first stage of glasnost was due in large part to the publication of articles dealing with victims of Stalin's terror, such as Bukharin and Raskolnikov. Korotich explained that the magazine received 'enormous public support' for articles dealing with what might be called retrospective glasnost because of 'the great yearning for justice among the people' (Korotich, 1988).

During this early period of glasnost, according to Pumpiansky (1990), there was still 'very limited freedom of the press' and publications such as *Moscow News* and *Ogonek* were seen by the public and the journalistic community as 'testing voices'. The publication of each new issue containing revelations from the past was accompanied by a fear among the journalistic community that the as yet undefined limits of glasnost had been over-reached. In other words, in the absence of any legally laid-down code preventing Communist Party interference in the workings of the press, the majority of journalists stood on the sidelines waiting to see how far the more daring newspapers and magazines would go before their editors were removed. This author, for example, can recall rumours circulating in Moscow all through 1987 that 'they've removed Korotich' ('synali Koroticha'). Perhaps an even more important factor that checked the expansion of glasnost at this time was the scepticism among Soviet journalists that the incipient liberalizing political climate was going to last.

Yet even at this early stage, the new limits of permissiveness, once broached with impunity by one publication, were established by other newspapers and magazines as territory gained. This early period of glasnost might be described figuratively as a piecemeal journalistic occupation of previously forbidden territory. Once a certain previously taboo topic had been touched upon by one publication and its editor still remained in place, then other editors from other publications took courage and followed suit. Yegor Yakovlev, editor of *Moscow News*, gave an example of this:

Let us say that previously our press never wrote about prostitutes. Now, however, one paper has written about them and it's a case of let's all write about this, and with a special passion (Yakovlev, 1987).

During this early period of glasnost, opposition to the new policy came from within the Politburo and the Party's Central Committee Secretariat. Before the 1988 reorganization of the Secretariat, the most important figure in the Politburo after the General Secretary, had been traditionally the Secretary for Ideology. Under Gorbachev, however, the early evolution of glasnost took place in spite of the Ideology Secretary, Yegor Ligachev. Before his removal from the Politburo at the XXVIII Party Congress (August 1990), Ligachev was still speaking of 'excesses of glasnost', warning that perestroika should be about 'creation - not negation' (see *Irish Times*, 22 July 1989 and *Economist*, 5-11 July 1989). This was and remained throughout the period under examination the main argument against glasnost of the conservative wing of the Party. In the early stages of glasnost it caused more concern and worry to editors and individual journalists than it did in 1990, by which time the gains established in the earlier two periods had been solidified. During the inaugural stage of glasnost, however, it became slowly evident that the policy of allowing the press greater freedom to write critically was sponsored by the General Secretary, Gorbachev. His frequent meetings with representatives of the press (Vstrecha, 1987), showed the journalistic community that he was interested in the press, though some thought too interested. Ligachev's known opposition to glasnost was counter-balanced by the active support for the new policy of the former Secretary for Propaganda, Alexander Yakovlev, known by the Western media in Moscow as 'Mr. Perestroika'. Pumpiansky describes his interpretation of the state of play at the time:

There were different reactions to the early manifestations of glasnost. The Party apparatus, for instance, was also (along with journalists themselves) surprised by the new press, and, to a certain extent, surprised at its own liberalism, 'Look how much we can tolerate!' And the reaction of the Party apparatus, of which the most prominent figure was Ligachev, was specific. From time to time they shouted and banged their fists, demanded people answer for publishing certain things, but it must be said that they didn't receive

the necessary support, because Gorbachev or Yakovlev, well, maybe Yakovlev was in a position to give a hint that he held a different position, but none the less, the actual support was varied. For example, Party conservatives got upset by different manifestations of journalistic glasnost', but nothing happened as a result. The heads of editors did not fly. So, it turned out that Yakovlev and Gorbachev had been supporting the press in a quiet way, not allowing the conservatives to translate their anger into practical action. However, on the verbal level, it still looked like the situation was being controlled by the conservatives, in any event, they could stamp their feet and bang their fists as much as they wanted. And it seemed that it was they who were controlling the situation, whereas in fact that was no longer the case. But this only became clear later, in time (Pumpiansky, 1990).

The perception around the end of 1987 that glasnost' was more than just a liberal blip permitted by an inexperienced new leader gradually became clearer so that in September of the following year the editor of *Ogonek*, Vitaly Korotich, could say that '...today, for the first time ever, the conservatives are on the defensive. They are in the minority and this is very significant.' (Korotich, 1988).

The second phase of glasnost', which began around 1988 and finished in 1990, became apparent when editors and readers saw that avant-garde publications such as *Ogonek* and *Moscow News* had not been shut down and were there to stay. Pumpiansky, again, explains :

If in the first phase each new issue appeared to be a surprise, in the second phase, this became the norm. Everybody came to understand that these journals and papers would be the same, and that each issue would not be the last one and that tomorrow's issue would be changed, or that the editor would be replaced, or the character of the paper would be changed. In the second phase, nothing of the sort (Pumpiansky, 1990).

One of the benchmarks that confirmed the end of the first phase came late in 1989 when, in what for the time seemed an uncharacteristically Brezhnevian reflex, Gorbachev exerted pressure on a prominent journalist to resign (Murray, 1989). Vladimir Starkov, editor of the weekly *Argumenty i fakty* (Arguments and Facts), had published the results of a survey measuring the popularity of the country's leading political figures in which Gorbachev did not figure in the first ten. After a tense period, during which some representatives of the press threatened to go on strike if Starkov was forced to resign, Gorbachev backed down. It was after this incident, according to Pumpiansky, that the radical press began to 'solidify and feel its strength'.

Yet this incident had also shown the vulnerability of the press to the mood swings of the leadership, especially when the demonology of the glasnost'-inspired journalist had begun to stray from the already safe figures of Stalin and Brezhnev to the still relatively untouched figures of Gorbachev himself, members of the Politburo, and Lenin. The Starkov affair was also a sharp reminder to journalists that no law existed guaranteeing the press freedom from such Party meddling. In theory, at least, Gorbachev could have decided at any moment that glasnost' had gone far enough and issued instructions outlining the areas of Soviet life which were not to be criticised. Older journalists remembered the speed with which Brezhnev had clamped down on the freedoms of the press that Krushchev had occasionally permitted. Juridically, then, journalists in 1989 had as little protection against Party interference as they had under Stalin.

In spite of its still juridically precarious position, it was during this second phase of glasnost' that the forced conformity of the Soviet press, begun under Lenin, began to shatter. This resulted in the phenomenon of different newspapers and magazines beginning to show distinctive political aspects. By 1988 it had become clear, for instance, that *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (Soviet Russia) was not only a conservative newspaper, but one actively promoting retrograde ideas such as the ending of glasnost'. At a plenary session of the formerly monolithic Union of Journalists, a speech from V. Chikin, deputy chairperson of that organisation and editor of *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, was criticized from the floor for paying lip-service to glasnost' and perestroika. Chikin spoke in favour of media criticism as long as it was 'ideologically progressive and spiritually rich in content' and contained 'constructiveness'. He also spoke against those newspapers that 'were sowing nihilistic moods' among the readers, and whose 'heads had turned' in their attempts to provide the readers with sensational stories (Chikin, 1988). While it is true that Chikin's newspaper became a platform for those opposed to glasnost' in the press, it is no less true that such a newspaper as his, expressing opinions different from those of the General Secretary, could not have

existed under any of the previous leaders of the country. One of the main achievements of glasnost' is the presence in the press of various strands of opinion giving voice to different political standpoints. In a sense, the co-existence of newspapers such as *Sovetskaya Rossiya* and the radical *Argumenty i fakty* was essential for the further development of the press in the Soviet Union.

Even during the second phase of glasnost', the authorities as well as editors of the radical official press still discriminated against unofficial publications. Unofficial publications, such as the monthly journal *Glasnost'*, edited by Sergei Grigoriants, were at this time fighting for the right to publish freely. In 1988, Grigoriants was arrested and the equipment for his journal destroyed. Yet even the most radically oriented official press failed to intercede on behalf of Grigoriants. As late as September 1988, for example, the editor of *Ogonek*, Korotich, repeated the official point of view regarding the unofficial publications.

I disagree with the entire principle of unofficial publications. ... These unofficial writers ought to try and get published in the existing organs of the press. Soon all these independent publications will no longer exist. And anyway, they can only produce about fifty copies since they use typewriters and carbon paper (Korotich, 1988).

The differences between the official and unofficial press were still great at this period. While the radical official press published material critical of the past and was beginning to question the current policies of the leadership, publications such as *Glasnost'* gave voice to material that questioned the very legitimacy of the Soviet Union. They represented the still publicly unacceptable voice of the dissident community and were regarded as subversive, pandering to Western public opinion and, consequently, guilty of treason. While, for instance, *Ogonek* and *Moscow News* might publish an article condemning the mass repressions in the 1930s as an instance of 'Stalinist lawlessness', the dissident press reminded its readers that most of Stalin's victims were convicted of crimes that still remained in Soviet law. While Korotich (1988), spoke of the dangers of going too far in retrospective glasnost', ('If we begin criticizing Lenin, then we'll end up destroying the whole temple, beginning with the foundations. I believe we have to leave the foundations intact.'), the dissident press gave utterance to its belief that the rot had set in as soon as Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power in 1917.

One objection to what the dissident press termed 'official glasnost', was the manner (described above by Yakovlev) in which 'official' journalists broached sensitive topics only after they had been written about by the more daring publications, and, hence, desensitized. By contrast, the dissident press had always been proud of its insensitivity to the political mood of the day.

The most important qualitative change that affected the development of glasnost' since 1985 took place in August 1990 with the passing of the long-awaited Law on the Press by the Soviet Parliament. What we have called the third stage of glasnost' began with the passing of this law. While the existence of a new law in itself did not guarantee the freedom of the press - laws can always be repealed or amended-it nevertheless provided a legal basis that protected the press from direct Party interference, the main impediment to freedom of expression in the Soviet Union. The law states, for example, that interference with the professional activities of journalists and even failure by officials to supply journalists with necessary information is an offence. It also stipulates that as long as a newspaper does not advocate armed revolution, religious prejudice or racial persecution and does not reveal any State secrets, anyone is entitled to set up a newspaper, magazine or news service by registering with the authorities.

However, in 1990, the Party still retained control over a large part of the publishing industry, and, in this way, indirect control over the non-Party press. The former editor of *Moskovskaya pravda*, Mikhail Poltoranin, pointed out that eighty per cent of the newspapers in the country were owned by the Communist Party (Dobbs, 1990). A *Moskovskie Novosti* journalist was unhappy that the State still determined the allocation of paper to newspapers and compared the new law to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861:

'The serfs were liberated, but they had been given freedom without land'. (Kabakov, 1990).

Because the powers of the Party and the State in 1990 were still intertwined, the Party still effectively retained control over the allocation of paper to the press and thus remained a potent force in checking the development of a free press in the Soviet Union. A new system of allocation was proposed for 1991, according to which the State would sell a certain amount of paper to registered newspapers at a relatively cheap price while any extra paper would have to be bought at 'commercial' prices, which, in

light of ever-present and mysterious paper shortages in the most heavily afforested country in the world, were set to rise in price threefold from January 1991. So, by the end of 1990, the paper shortage and the cost of paper at non-State, 'commercial' prices had become the most pressing concern for non-Party or State affiliated papers. In the words of Poltoranin, the passing of the August 1990 Press Law 'politically opens up great possibilities for the Soviet press, but economically, the possibilities are limited' (Dobbs, 1990).

Because of the Party's continuing grip on the State planning mechanism, Gosplan, official newspapers that become radicalized in the first two stages of glasnost' and wanted to register under the new law in 1990 as independent organs shrank from the ultimate step of disassociating themselves fully from their official sponsors. One example was the Moscow daily, *Moskovsky komsomolets* (The Moscow Komsomol), which, with a 1.5 million daily print-run, was in 1990 the largest-selling daily in the capital. The journalists and editor of the newspaper decided collectively to remain an organ of their sponsors, the Moscow City Committee of the Komsomol because, on the one hand, it gave the paper, in the words of one of its staff 'a certain status and guarantee of stability if anything should happen', and, on the other hand, provided a guarantee of a favourable allotment of paper at State prices.

Pumpiansky of *Novoye vremya* summarized the position of the press at the end of 1990 thus :

Over the past year [1990], the press has become extremely radicalized. The circulation of *Komsomolskaya pravda* and *Argumenty i fakty* has leapt. The left press has felt its strength. Then in August the Law on the Press was passed and censorship was abolished, juridically, while at the same time it became clear that the Party apparatus had collapsed. Ligachev was no more and it was no longer clear what the Ideological Department of the Communist Party was doing. In any event, it was clear that they had no relation to the everyday life of newspapers and magazines, except, maybe, Party papers, which, incidentally, are doing the worst and losing the most readers. So, you may not have noticed, but we're almost a free press now, or we have one foot in the side of a free press. Nobody is afraid any more of the conservatives shouting, or the Party leadership. If there are any worries, they are completely different to those we had before. Now our worries are about existing in the market place, about the price and availability of paper, money, finance, competition and becoming commercially viable, because, naturally, we have to make money, and think of producing a quality product. Our worries are on a completely new level.

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